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# HISTORIC SPOTS IN WISCONSIN

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## VI. MEEME, A FRONTIER SETTLEMENT THAT DEVELOPED STRONG MEN<sup>1</sup>

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.

The pioneer days of Wisconsin, when stalwart men and brave women were reared amid surroundings of poverty and hardship, are now remembered only by the oldest of our people; and ere long history alone can tell the story of the reclamation of the wilderness, so bravely begun by the settlers of four score years ago. With this thought, it becomes a pleasure to hear from the lips of men still living the early story of a locality that has given the flower of its manhood to Wisconsin and to America.

About fourteen miles southwest of Manitowoc, in the township of Meeme, is situated the inconspicuous hamlet designated on the county maps as Osman, but known in the early days as Meeme Post Office. It is today the center of a rich agricultural district but makes no claim to importance except as it retains the two institutions, the church and the public school, that helped to mold real men and women a generation or more ago.

The Meeme settlement, as it was called, centered around the Catholic church known as St. Isadore's and the public school. It embraced a portion of the townships of Meeme, Newton, and Liberty. The first settlers were largely natives of Ireland; and Meeme was commonly known as the "Irish settlement." With the birthright of native ability and the fullest use of their scanty educational opportunities the sons of these Irish pioneers made their names known and their influence felt far beyond the borders of their restricted locality in eastern Wisconsin.

<sup>1</sup> I gladly acknowledge my obligation to Henry Mulholland Jr. of Manitowoc and M. V. Sullivan of Fond du Lac for the data upon which this article is based.

Meeme is said to mean "pigeon" in the Chippewa Indian language; and the name was probably applied because there was in the vicinity an extensive wild pigeon roost. Henry Mulholland of Manitowoc, whose father, Henry Mulholland Sr., was one of the earliest settlers in the Meeme region, states that in his boyhood days the wild pigeons were so numerous in the vicinity as to darken the sun in their flight. He states further that the wild pigeons were destroyed by the Indians and by the early settlers in incredible numbers. He remembers the time when the nests were threshed from the trees with long poles and the young pigeons or squabs gathered up by the bushel by the Indians, who fried them in large pans to remove the oil from them. This pigeon oil was an article of barter and was offered by the dusky natives in exchange for whiskey and sometimes for the more essential articles of food and clothing. The traders then sold it to the settlers for use in lamps. It is said that when whiskey was exchanged for oil the traders were in the habit of putting a quart of water in the top of the barrel for every quart of whiskey that was drawn out at the bottom. When this dilution had gone too far, the Indians would refuse to trade until a new barrel was tapped.

As Meeme Post Office was on the old stage road midway between Manitowoc and Sheboygan, all stage vehicles stopped at the Mulholland home for dinner and to change horses. The result was that many visitors passed through the place; almost any noon hour of the year found the hamlet enlivened by transients, often men of note from the cities. This was especially true in winter when there was no boat service between Manitowoc and Sheboygan. Upon the arrival of the stage the entire population was wont to gather at the Mulholland tavern, there to discuss the news of the outside world as revealed by the Chicago papers.

The Meeme settlement was begun in 1847-48; in a few years there were enough people in the community to warrant

the building of a log church and the opening of a public school in the home of John Stewart. Mr. Stewart was the first of a long line of teachers in this rural school which played so large a part in the development of the community. In the beginning the settlers were poor and could barely afford the expense of maintaining the school; however, as the neighborhood developed the people showed their willingness to pay the price for the best of rural schoolmasters. Patrick O'Shea was one of the early teachers and took charge of the school in 1853 or thereabouts. He had been a schoolmaster of high-school rank in Ireland and was equipped with an excellent education for his day. His knowledge of mathematics is said to have been remarkable. However, the Meeme school board hesitated to employ him because of his broad brogue which probably diverged widely from classical English. He finally secured the position and fully justified the reluctant confidence of the august body that had hired him. The school board at this time consisted of Henry Mulholland Sr., Peter Walterbach, and Dennis Nagle. The last named was the father of John Nagle who in after years was known as an able educator and still later became the editor of the *Manitowoc Pilot*, in which capacity he attracted attention throughout the country by his philosophical editorials and other contributions. In his death, a few years ago, Manitowoc County lost one of its most distinguished citizens and Wisconsin its ablest newspaper man. It is a coincidence that the present editor of the *Manitowoc Pilot*, E. S. Crowe, is also one of the former Meeme boys.

Another of the teachers of the Meeme school was T. J. Walsh, who later went to Montana and is now United States Senator from that state. He is still remembered by the old-time residents of the district as an instructor of marked energy and commanding personality. One of the outstanding features of this rural school was its debating society. It is safe to say that the boys of the locality who later be-

came conspicuously successful in business, in the professions, or in politics, owe their success in large measure to the training they received in joint debates on the rostrum of the little schoolhouse. As the youth of this school attained the highest average of success of any rural district of Wisconsin, so was the school itself long considered the standard for country schools. The best teachers were always secured; and the matter of the salary paid was a secondary consideration. Some of our school boards of today could well find an object lesson in the history of the Meeme school.

Henry Mulholland Sr. donated three acres of land from his farm for a church site and cemetery. In 1848 a log church was built on this plot; this was torn down and replaced by a frame structure during the period of the Civil War. This congregation of St. Isadore's has had a continuous history from 1848 to the present time; a register of its membership during that long period would contain many names familiar to the people of Wisconsin and of the entire country.

The late Justice John Barnes of the Wisconsin Supreme Court was born and reared in the Meeme settlement. As a boy he attended the excellent rural school that was the intellectual corner stone of the community; later on he became a teacher in the same school. He was graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1883 and practised law until he was elected municipal judge in Oneida County. Later he was appointed a member of the Wisconsin Railroad Commission from which position he resigned in 1907 rather than swerve from his convictions. In 1908 he was elected to the Supreme Court, serving until 1916, when he resigned to become general counsel for the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company of Milwaukee. He died in Milwaukee on January 1, 1919.

Judge Michael Kirwan of Manitowoc is also a Meeme product who made his way to a position of honor in Wisconsin. Before he studied law he was a teacher in the rural

schools and superintendent of schools for Manitowoc County. To him and John Nagle, who was also superintendent of schools before he became an editor, is given the credit for having raised the standard of the rural schools of Manitowoc County until they attracted the attention of the entire state. Judge Kirwan's ability, integrity, and fitness for his present judicial position are matters too well known in eastern Wisconsin to require extended comment.

Without detracting in any degree from the fame of the galaxy of brilliant men who at one time or another have called Meeme their home it may be said that John Nagle was more widely known during his lifetime than any of the others. Although this philosopher-essayist chose to spend his life and his talents in a small city on the shore of Lake Michigan he was born a newspaper man of metropolitan caliber, and his editorials and contributed articles were read from ocean to ocean.

The Connell family of Meeme sent out two physicians and surgeons: Dr. Daniel Connell now of Beloit, whose youthful oratory in the rural school gave him the nickname of "Daniel O'Connell"; and Dr. J. P. Connell who died several years ago in Fond du Lac where he had made a remarkable record as a successful surgeon.

The several Taugher families of this pioneer settlement contributed two priests and either two or three physicians. One of the former, the Reverend M. J. Taugher, was for many years located in Fond du Lac as pastor of St. Joseph's Church.

One of the early-day schoolmasters at Meeme was Henry Mulholland Jr., who was educated at St. Francis Seminary near Milwaukee. Other members of the Mulholland family were Peter, who was a captain in the Civil War and later sheriff of Manitowoc County; and Dr. John Mulholland. Peter Mulholland died a few years after the close of the Civil War, his illness and death resulting from exposure during his

military service. Among others who learned the lesson of self-reliance on the Meeme farms half a century ago were Dr. Hays; John Carey, a well-known local politician of three or four decades ago; and M. V. and J. E. Sullivan, now engaged in business in Fond du Lac.

The above record of illustrious sons is far from complete; however, it is sufficient to indicate the type of men who were developed in this farming community. One fact may explain the success of these farmer boys: the Meeme settlers evolved the idea of making their public school a social and intellectual center for adults as well as for children. Good literature was read to the assembled people; and oratory and alertness were developed in the frequent debating contests that were a major part of the school activities. No expense was spared in securing for the district the best teachers available. As a result no rural school in Wisconsin out-ranked the little institution at the Meeme crossroads. It was a case of casting bread upon the waters and finding it after many days.